BANFGM PROJECT FOR THE
ELIMINATION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (2014-2018)

Project Partners.

Burkina Faso: Voix des Femmes.
Gambia: Gambian Committee on Traditional Practices
Guinea: Cellule de Coordination sur les Pratiques Traditionnelles Affectant la Santé des Femmes et des Enfants
Cote d’Ivoire: Fondation Djigui La Grande Esperance
Mauritanie: Association pour la Promotion de l’Egalité de Genre et des Droits Humains
Niger: Comité nigérien sur les pratiques traditionnelles
Senegal: La Palabre

In cooperation with Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices

With the support of
Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Italian Agency for Development Cooperation
FGM: a harmful practice that constitutes a serious human rights violation

The commitment of African activists, prominent international political leaders and of a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) against female genital mutilation (FGM) dates back to the 1980s. When this mobilisation began, the issue was largely ignored or underestimated, the involvement of governments almost non-existent and the work of United Nations agencies focused on supporting local actors’ initiatives very limited. There was no data on the phenomenon and its prevalence.

The first investigation of FGM was conducted between 1989 and 1992 by the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) program in 24 countries. There was no comprehensive strategy to confront this widespread human rights violation. Every approach focused on the harmful consequences of FGM for the physical and mental health of women and girls. The issue was approached only from a social and public health perspective and prevention strategies were limited accordingly.

For a long time, the medical and health aspects of FGM were the focus of various campaigns against it, which unexpectedly favoured the prioritisation of “medicalisation” and the perception that this approach would be acceptable, given the perceived impossibility of its complete eradication. The rate of FGM carried out in medical facilities or by medical professionals started growing as medicalisation tried to “reduce damage”. The mere fact that the mutilation was performed in a protected environment by medical professionals using advanced and sterilised medical devices was considered acceptable because it reduced the risks of FGM. This trend risked legitimising and institutionalising the practice because it did not question the very nature of FGM, but addressed only its consequences. Legislation reforms prohibiting FGM started to be adopted in some African States although a full awareness of the issue and the relevant enforcement were still lacking.

This is why, at the international level, the most prominent African activists, alongside with Emma Bonino and No Peace Without Justice, the Inter-African Committee Against Harmful Practice (CIAF) and other NGOs working at national level took the initiative to transform the issue of the elimination of FGM into a political question by identifying it as a violation of fundamental human rights.

This led to a global sensitisation campaign towards governments, political and religious leaders in the most affected countries and at European and International levels. A coordinated and global campaign aimed at adopting legislative instruments criminalising FGM was perceived as a necessary step in order to make people aware that FGM is is contrary to basic women’s rights and not required by any religious precepts.

An essential step of the campaign was the progressive involvement of the African Union. Indeed, the AU has showed a growing interest in the matter and has become an active and committed promoter of the idea that FGM is not simply a harmful ancestral practice but an attempt to attack and undermine the physical integrity of women.
The global campaign against FGM acknowledged that changing the perceptions about the nature of FGM was not optional, but rather an essential pillar of bringing about its elimination: this led to the articulation of FGM as a human rights issue and to its inclusion within the human rights framework.

FGM is not only a blatant abuse of the fundamental right to physical integrity but is also a major threat to individual freedom and individual choice. At the same time, the campaign also had to confront the defence of FGM on the grounds of religion: although it does not stem from religion, FGM are often justified using a religious pretext. Many who perpetuate this misconception are persuaded that FGM is dictated by religion, whether due to supportive statements by religious leaders, silence or ambiguity, which are usually perceived as an endorsement of the practice.

The Cairo Conference, organised in 2003, which gathered governments and activists of the 29 African countries most affected by the practice, was attended also by the most important religious authorities of the Muslim and Coptic faiths and was a watershed event for the deconstruction of this myth. During the meeting, the chair of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Imam Mohamed Sayed Tantawi stated that “(...) there is nothing about FGM in the Shar’ia, the Quran or in the Sunna of the Prophet. There is no hint of this issue in the sacred texts.” The representative for the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III, also stated that “(...) a firm and resolute position must be taken against this harmful practice and, just like the great Imam did earlier, for what concerns Christianity, this practice has nothing to do with our religion, it has no practical, medical or moral reasons”.

The campaign has also produced important results at the regional level, with the adoption in 2003 of the Maputo Protocol by the leaders of the African Union. The Protocol states in article 5 that “States shall prohibit and condemn all forms of harmful practice which negatively affect the human rights of women and which are contrary to recognized international standards”.

Armed with Article 5 of the Maputo Protocol, African and international activists continued to campaign for its ratification and change in the relevant countries. The role of institutions and the responsibility of the State were enshrined in a formal treaty: the importance of a legal ban on FGM could no longer be denounced as a “Western” influence, the Maputo Protocol being an African Union document.

In order to change perceptions about FGM and address it as a violation of the universal human right to physical integrity and personal self-determination, a more ambitious endeavour was adopted, aiming to achieve universal recognition of FGM as a human rights violation, through the adoption of a United Nations General Assembly Resolution. The objective was to engage UN Member States and to elevate the obligations to prohibit and sanction FGM contained in Article 5 of the Maputo Protocol to a world-wide ban.

This ambitious plan came across numerous challenges but eventually prevailed by engaging with women leaders, members of parliament and government ministers at all levels. One of the key intermediate steps in the UN campaign was to obtain the endorsement of the African Union, which happened in 2011 through the African Union Assembly’s Decision, Assembly/AU/12(XVII) Add.5, in which of Heads of State and Government expressly engaged their New York representations to promote a UN General Assembly resolution including a worldwide ban on FGM. This AU Decision was a key tool for direct and sustained
advocacy towards the AU Member States’ Permanent Representatives at the United Nations over subsequent months.

The campaign achieved its objective of a UN Worldwide Ban on FGM through Resolution 67/146, which was presented by Burkina Faso with the support of the African Group and adopted by consensus in December 2012, i.e. with the agreement of all UN member States without the need to vote on the text, thanks in large part to the political will of the group of African states at the UN, as well as the support of UNFPA and UNICEF joint program.

This is an historic achievement: today, FGM is universally recognised as one of the gravest violations of human rights. There was, however, a more important purpose: the UNGA Resolution was intended to provide a strong advocacy tool for national policy and legal change for these same activists that had campaigned for it at the UN.

During the aftermath of the adoption of the Resolution, those campaigning for a ban on FGM agreed to launch a vast campaign to support its objectives and to consolidate its content both on a legislative level and vis-à-vis the public opinion. The process which led to the launching of the project "Ban FGM: for the elimination of female genital mutilation" (2014-2018), was made possible by the strong political and financial support of the Italian Government.

The project promotes implementation of the UNGA Resolution, and in particular the implementation of laws banning this human rights violation, by strengthening the political and institutional framework in accordance with the provisions of the Resolution. The project was developed and is conducted in cooperation with NPWJ’s partner organisations in seven West African target countries of the project, in cooperation with the regional network CIAF, namely Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal.

The objective of the project is to empower human rights activists, members of parliament and women’s organisations to advocate for stronger institutional commitment, renewed national strategies to combat FGM as a violation of the human rights of women and for better policies and legislation, so that the worldwide ban they were themselves the driving force behind would be translated into real protection at a local level. The project engaged with human rights activists, members of parliament, relevant ministries and government committees, representatives of the judiciary and the police and other institutional actors.

The project is ultimately aimed at supporting and protecting women and girls who have been subject to or who are at risk of FGM, community members, families and parents who make the decision to subject girls to FGM and the wider community, including boys and men.

During the project the following activities have been held:

National workshops to foster the effective implementation of the UNGA Resolution banning Female Genital Mutilation:

- National Workshop in Cote d’Ivoire, Abidjan, 4-5 February 2015
- National Workshop in Mauritania, Nouakchott, 10-11 February 2015
- National Workshop in Niger, Niamey, 6-7 May 2015
- National Workshop in Senegal, Dakar, 12 May 2015
- National consultation in Gambia, Kaira Konko, Jarra Soma, 21 May 2015
- National workshop in Guinea, Gueckédou, 6 February 2016
- National workshop in Mauritania, Nouakchott, 8-9 February 2016
- National workshop, Gambia, Banjul, 6 February 2016
- National Workshop in Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan, 27-29 December 2016
- National Workshop in Senegal, Dakar, 20 December 2016
- National Workshop in Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, 19-20 January 2017
- National workshop in Guinea, Conakry, 19-20 January 2017
- National workshop in Guinea, Conakry, November 2017
- National Workshop in Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan, 16-17 January 2018
- National tour in selected villages, Mauritania, January 2018.

And the following, to be held in February 2018:
- National workshops in Burkina Faso
- National workshops in Gambia
- National workshops in Senegal

Ministerial-level International Conferences:
- High Level Conference to promote the Worldwide Ban on Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriages Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 26 April 2014
- The Ministerial Sub-Regional Consultation to foster effective implementation of UNGA resolution banning Female Genital Mutilation, Dakar, Senegal, 26-27 April 2016
- The BanFGM Conference on the global ban on Female Genital Mutilation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation - Italian Senate, Rome, 30 January – 1 February 2017

In addition, a High Level event to strengthen the political commitment in the fight against Female Genital Mutilation was organised in the framework of the ECOWAS Forum of First Ladies and Ministers Niamey, Niger on 2-5 October 2017.

Today, NPWJ and its partners, represented by their regional network, CIAF, have returned to the 30th African Union Summit to recognise the role of the African Union over the years, report on the progress and outcomes of the campaign, recognise the outgoing President of the African Union H.E. Alpha Conde, President of the Republic of Guinea and H.E. Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, President of the Republic of Burkina Faso for their commitment for the elimination of FGM and child marriage in Africa through a Prize of Political Excellence and High Level Leadership in Africa, and advocate for renewed engagement of AU Member States and the AU Commission in support of national holistic strategies to ban FGM, and all harmful traditional practices, which are a violation of the right to personal integrity throughout Africa and the world.